



MAMLECHET HACHAI: ANIMAL PUNISHMENT

ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT THINGS FOR US TO UNDERSTAND IN THE TORAH IS THE PUNISHMENT OF ANIMALS.

- Why should an animal be judged and punished like a human being?
- The Mishna, one of our great books that teaches the path we should follow in life, asks this question: “If man has sinned, in what way has the animal sinned” so as to be punished? (Sanhedrin 54a)
- The Mishna answers that sometimes an animal—possibly through no fault of its own—attracts a person to do the wrong thing.
- It’s like people who own vicious dogs and who are tempted to use their animals to frighten and lord it over other people to get their way.
- The Rabbis said that it’s wrong for the animal to go free while the person is punished.
- Can you think of any reason why they might have decided that if the man is punished, the dog should be too?

THE TORAH TEACHES US THAT JUST BEFORE THE PEOPLE WERE FREED FROM SLAVERY IN EGYPT, GOD KILLED ALL THE FIRSTBORN OF EGYPT, INCLUDING THE FIRSTBORN OF THE CATTLE. (Exodus 12:29)

- The Rabbis asked this question: Even if we assume that all the Egyptian’s firstborn deserved to die, what sins could the cattle be guilty of?
- Do you have any idea why God may have punished the cattle?
- The Rabbis teach that it was not because of anything the cattle did but because they were worshipped as gods by the Egyptians.
- Why might that be important?
- If the firstborn of the cattle survived the plague, the Egyptians might have thought even more so that the cattle were gods.

SO WE CAN SEE THAT SOMETIMES INNOCENT ANIMALS SUFFER PUNISHMENT.

- Do you know of any other situations where someone who is innocent of doing anything wrong suffers because of someone else’s wrongdoing?

- Has that ever happened to you?
- So we know that God created the world in a way such that, when we do wrong, we may cause innocent people to suffer or be punished.

HOW DID THE RABBIS UNDERSTAND THIS SITUATION, WHICH SEEMS TO BE UNFAIR AND UNJUST?

- Judaism teaches us that all of nature is God's creation and that, whenever possible, we are to show respect and compassion to all living creatures.
- The very word in Hebrew for food that is not kosher, traditionally forbidden to a Jew, is *treif*, which means torn—because Torah forbids the cruel practice of eating a limb that was torn from a living animal, which was common in the ancient world.
- But the Torah also teaches us that the animals were created to *serve* humankind (Sanhedrin 108a), even though they have a living soul.

WHAT MIGHT WE THINK FROM ALL THIS?

- It seems that God has created a world in which the needs and purposes of humankind are placed *above* those of animals.
- So if we are to guide our own behavior in the image of God, although we will be *fair* to animals, we will put the needs of human beings first.



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